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Part 1: News Analysis

Almost a year to the day of the unexpected passing of “president for life” Saparmurat Niyazov, President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov took an upbeat retrospective look at his first year in power. At a series of year-end Cabinet of Minister meetings, he expressed satisfaction with his dramatic turn from isolationist to cooperative foreign policy and with achievements in electoral and education reforms, and announced impressive statistics in all areas of the economy from gas to fishing, according to his ministries’ reports. Turkmenistan enjoyed a markedly productive year in 2007: overall, the GNP rose 111.6 percent compared to 2006, with a 10-percent increase in gas exports and a 9-percent increase in gas and oil production;.

Yet the president also made some high-profile dismissals of government officials and severely reprimanded bureaucrats for being laggards or obstructive in many areas. Even in the lucrative energy sector, the president charged that the new agency to manage hydrocarbon resources “has not changed anything,” with investment not reflected in output. Myratgeldi Basimgulyyevich Orazov, first deputy interior minister, was dismissed “for shortcomings” in his work. Garyagdy Tasliyev, state minister and chair of the state oil concern, and another pipeline construction official were reprimanded for not implementing the gas and oil program.

“You only work when we lead you by the hand and show you every step of your way,” the president scolded the minister of agriculture, whose sector had shown flat statistics for milk, meat, and animal production. He also dismissed the official responsible for rural machinery and chafed at reports that scarce hard currency payments were having to go to foreign construction firms, urging the domestic industry to step up capacity. US \$4 billion will be earmarked mainly for rural development in 2008, the president noted, approving a plan through 2020 to improve living standards in villages and towns. Meanwhile, the émigré organization Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights questioned whether the constant replacements of national and local officials will lead to fear of making needed changes and inability to acquire sufficient expertise to manage sectors .

This week President Berdimukhamedov finally closed the deal on the proposed tripartite agreement among Russia, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan to begin construction on a Caspian coastal pipeline. In a telephone call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia, the two leaders arranged to sign the agreement in Moscow on December 20. The Turkmen leader also took care to telephone his Uzbek counterpart, President Islam Karimov, to discuss regional issues and gained his support for Turkmenistan’s proposed UN resolution to ensure energy security, specifically trans-national pipeline security. Kazakhstan’s foreign minister also emphasized the importance of the new Iran-Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan railway which will boost Turkmenistan’s exports. The Turkmen leader also received Gernot Erler, Minister of State of the Federal Foreign Office of Germany on December 19, who expressed admiration for Turkmenistan’s foreign policy achievements and domestic reforms and proposed restoring a Turkmen-German economic forum, with a trade delegation to visit in early 2008.

The Turkmen leader’s decision to retain a national holiday to honor his oppressive predecessor, Saparmurat Niyazov, seemed largely prompted by the need to keep reverence intact for a national hero and a state ideology that provides a cohesive national vision. “The elder did a great deal for the country,” President Berdimukhamedov remarked, referring to Niyazov, “and the one-year anniversary [of his death] has to be

commemorated.” The Muslim holiday of Kurban Bayram and of New Year’s Eve were also to be officially celebrated by residents “like one, big, happy family,” urged the president.

Far less progress was seen on domestic human rights issues. While a new law was passed December 19 nominally supporting women’s equality with men, women hold only ceremonial government posts. The Turkmen government allowed only one government-controlled aircraft of passengers to make the hajj – along with security police – despite pledges to allow more in keeping with Saudi Arabia’s invitation for 5,000, Forum 18 News Service reported. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom released a report this week finding that “despite some modest changes, significant religious freedom problems persist and official harassment is continuing” of unsanctioned religious groups. The Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights published reports of abuse and poor conditions in the armed services especially for new recruits, causing a number of soldiers to desert.

Part 2: News Digest

Summary: Turkmenistan, Russia, and Kazakhstan signed a long-anticipated agreement to begin construction of the Caspian coastal pipeline to bring Turkmen gas to world markets. President Berdymukhamedov called for a UN resolution to secure pipelines. Year-end reports showed an impressive 111.6% GNP increase, but officials were reprimanded or dismissed for poor work. The President ordered the commemoration of the death of his predecessor, the dictator Saparmurat Niyazov, on December 21.

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1. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

a. Turkmenistan Supports UN Resolution on Security of International Pipelines

Source: Interfax/12/18/07. Synopsis prepared by OSI Turkmenistan Project

Synopsis: Turkmenistan will support a UN resolution to promote international pipeline security, President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov said at a government meeting broadcast on state television December 18, Interfax reported.

"We are putting forward a new initiative, which aims to ensure the energy situation," the president said, explaining that the move would serve the interests of the Turkmen people, the region, and the international community. The president said the effort reflected "additional commitments" Turkmenistan has assumed in exporting energy.

b. German Delegation Visits Turkmenistan

Original title: FRG Delegation Visits Turkmenistan

Source: Official Turkmen Government Website/12/18-19/07

*Electronic I version: <http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/en/?idr=1&id=071218c>;
<http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/en/?idr=1&id=071219c>*

A delegation of the Federal Republic of Germany led by Gernot Erler, Minister of State of the Federal Foreign Office visited Turkmenistan December 18-19. The delegation of the foreign office of the Federal Republic of Germany was received at the Government of Turkmenistan, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights under President of Turkmenistan.

The President of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov received Gernot Erler [on December 19].

[Passage omitted: greetings and mention of Turkmen president's recent visit to Brussels and priority of Europe in Turkmenistan's foreign policy.]

Thanking the President of Turkmenistan for the heartfelt welcome for the positive interest in co-operation with Germany, Erler expressed Germany's intense interest in building a reliable bridge between Europe and the rapidly developing region of Turkmenistan, which played a key role in the geopolitical space of Central Asia. The high-ranking official of the Federal Foreign Office of the FRG said that the European community welcomed the large-scale reforms initiated in Turkmenistan and the Turkmen leader's policy based on the principles of peacefulness, good neighborliness and a contribution to tackling regional problems. The guest spoke of Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov's new initiatives, including opening the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy in Ashgabat, and energy security. The Minister of State of the Federal Foreign Office highly appreciated the support Turkmenistan provided to neighboring Afghanistan.

[Passage omitted on development of interstate dialogue on issues including education and combatting drug abuse, crime, and terrorism].

Speaking about the necessity of enhancing trade and co-operation in commerce between the two countries the two parties called for restoration of the institution of the Turkmen-German economic forum, which is an effective mechanism for implementing considerable potential by providing for mutual interests. Erler announced that a representative delegation consisting of the leaders of German business companies led by the Minister of State for Economy of the FRG would visit Turkmenistan at the beginning of 2008. FRG Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Turkmenistan Hans Mondorf took part in the meeting.

c. Turkmenistan to Open Embassy in Saudi Arabia

Source: Official Turkmen Government website/12/18/07

Full version: <http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/en/?idr=1&id=071218b>

The President of Turkmenistan issued a decree on the opening an embassy of Turkmenistan in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Er-Riyadh), the official government website reported.

d. Turkmen and Russian Leaders Agree to Sign Caspian Agreement December 20

Original title: Telephone Conversation of Presidents of Turkmenistan and Russian Federation

Source: Official Turkmen Government website/12/18/07

Full version: <http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/?idr=1&id=071218d>

President Berdymukhamedov spoke with Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin on December 18, the official government website reported, citing the Turkmen State News Agency (TDH).

[Passage omitted on dynamic relations built on mutual benefit and friendship.]

The two presidents exchanged opinions on a number of priority issues of bilateral cooperation, and expressed satisfaction at Turkmenistan's consistent progress in building the Caspian coastal pipeline. In this connection, the presidents agreed that the signing of the tripartite agreement on the implementation of this large-scale project would take place in Moscow on December 20. Turkmenistan would send a high-ranking delegation to take part in the document-signing ceremony in Moscow.

As Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov and Vladimir Putin emphasized, the year 2007 was marked by a reinvigoration of Turkmen-Russian relations, which started a new stage of fruitful cooperation in both the economic and humanitarian spheres. The presidents expressed mutual readiness to expand this cooperation, having discussed its parameters, to meet the demands of the time as well as the interests of both countries.

[Passage omitted on New Year's wishes.]

e. U.S. Commission Releases Report on Religious Freedom in Turkmenistan

Original title: Release of USCIRF Policy Focus Turkmenistan

Source: US Commission on International Religious Freedom/12/18/07

Full version: http://www.uscifr.gov/mediaroom/press/2007/december/121207_eventAdvisory.html

Copies of the report are available from communications@uscifr.gov.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (US CIRF) and Freedom House co-hosted a presentation by Commission Chair Michael Cromartie and Commissioner Don Argue of the Commission's latest Policy Focus, on Turkmenistan, which is based on a Commission delegation trip in August 2007, the US CIRF reported on its website. The Commission delegation was the first group of official U.S. visitors to focus on human rights in Turkmenistan following the death of dictator Saparmurat Niyazov. The presentation will be followed by a roundtable discussion on the state of religious freedom and related human rights in the Central Asian nation. Jeff Goldstein, Freedom House's Senior Manager for Central Asia programs, will comment.

While in Turkmenistan, the Commission delegation looked at the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. It found that despite some modest changes, significant religious freedom problems persist and official harassment is continuing under the new government of President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov. In some regions, the Commission delegation learned, certain religious freedom conditions may be deteriorating.

f. Kazakh Foreign Minister Stresses Importance of New Regional Railway

Original title: *Importance of Iran-Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan Railway Underlined.*

Source: *teherantimes.com/Nei'tral'niy Turkmenistan/12/18/07. Synopsis prepared by OSI Turkmenistan Project.*

Full version: http://www.teherantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=159438

Synopsis: Murat Atanev, the Kazakh ambassador to Turkmenistan, said construction of the Iran-Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan railway would play a very important role in expanding regional cooperation, *teherantimes.com* reported, citing IRNA and *Nei'tral'niy Turkmenistan*, the state newspaper. Atanev said the railroad would link Central Asian republics with the Persian Gulf and Europe via Iran. Turkmenistan plays a critical role because of its gas exports to Russia, Ukraine, Europe and China, he said. Atanev expressed satisfaction with relations between Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, saying the volume of trade would increase.

g. Turkmen President Gains Uzbek President's Support of UN Resolution on Energy Security

Original title: *Leaders of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan Confirm Unity of Views on Issues of Energy Policy*

Source: *turkmenistan.ru/12/19/07. Synopsis prepared by OSI Turkmenistan Project.*

Full version: http://www.turkmenistan.ru/?page_id=3&lang_id=en&elem_id=11882&type=event&sort=date_desc

Synopsis: President Berdymukhamedov spoke with President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan on the telephone December 18, *turkmenistan.ru* reported, citing the Turkmen State News Agency (TDH). The two leaders discussed bilateral priorities and other concerns of mutual interest. President Karimov indicated his decisive support for the initiative of the Turkmen leader to support a UN resolution on security for trans-national pipeline infrastructure. "Such a responsible and constructive approach, which Turkmenistan is demonstrating regarding questions of energy policy is completely in accordance with the goals and tasks of the UN, and meets national and international interests," Karimov was quoted as saying.

As energy resources are a strategic factor in the stable development of both states, the two countries indicated their close cooperation on the basis of unity of views on major trends of world development, TDH reported.

2. DOMESTIC DEVELOPMENTS

a. President Berates Government Officials for Poor Performance; Orders Niyazov Commemoration

Original title: *Turkmen Leader Sums up Cabinet's Work in 2007, Orders Niyazov Commemoration*

Source: *BBC Monitoring—Central Asia/12/18/07/TV Asyr Asyr/12/17/07*

Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov held a year-end government meeting on 17 December, during which various spheres of government policy were discussed. The session was broadcast on the Turkmen Altyn Asyr TV channel on the same day. Issues related to the celebration of Id al-Adha and commemoration ceremonies related to the one-year anniversary of the death of the first president of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, were also discussed at the session.

Noting that the two events coincided this year, President Berdymukhamedov said: "The elder [Niyazov] did a great deal for the country, for the people, and the one-year anniversary has to be marked." After consulting with clergymen, the president set commemoration events for 20-21 December and said: "Tell everyone [about the commemoration events], let them come, because the elder was a dear person to all of us. Let's commemorate him on a large scale. It is a hard day for all of us, we should admit. It is life. We lost a great person."

In a speech summing up the government's performance in the year 2007, which Berdymukhamedov described as a "crucial year" in the country's development, the Turkmen leader noted reforms in various areas and the growing international reputation of Turkmenistan.

Berdymukhamedov also criticized Deputy Prime Minister Gurbannazar Asyrov for the poor performance of almost all types of transportation and communications services and slow progress in the construction of the Turkmen sector of the railway line Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran, which was launched two weeks ago.

Berdymukhamedov noted that investments into the oil and gas sector did not pay back well. The target volume of 10m tons of oil production has not been achieved; and the special agency for the management and use of hydrocarbon resources, created for the coordination of efforts in this sector, "has not changed anything".

The president also set out major plans to be implemented in the areas of construction and power engineering. He announced that US \$4bn dollars are to be invested in rural development over the coming years and urged the creation of Turkmenistan's own construction companies, noting that "hard currency [paid for construction projects] is not used in our country, but goes elsewhere". Berdymukhamedov criticized relevant officials for slow progress in science and lack of creativity in culture and media development, despite "significant resources" allocated.

The minister of agriculture was also criticized for lack of a specific strategic program in the agriculture sector. "You only work when we lead you by hand and show your every step of your way," the president said to the minister. Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov also stressed the importance of scientific research in agriculture and proper use of agricultural equipment.

Nor was the president happy with the pace of financial reforms. "We should certainly establish a unified exchange rate for our national manat [currency] by 2009," Berdymukhamedov said addressing financial sector officials.

He also stressed the need for a proper legislative base for carrying out reforms. Berdymukhamedov said that the current stage of the state's development required "a new look at laws, the elimination of the existing discrepancies and bringing our legislation into compliance with international law". A review of legislation is also necessary to attract larger investments into the country, Berdymukhamedov noted and gave relevant instructions to the minister of justice and the parliament speaker.

The minister of economy and finance, who presented his yearly report at the session, said that GDP growth will be 111.6 per cent this year. It is also expected that the inflation rate will not be more than 6 per cent, he said. Gas exports will rise by 10 per cent in 2007.

At the session, Berdymukhamedov sacked the chairman of the Turkmen rural machinery services association, Serip Tajov, for "serious shortcomings in work". Berdymukhamedov also appointed Palvan Taganov as chairman of the chamber of commerce and industry and Allamyrat Esenov as editor-in-chief of the newly created agricultural newspaper "Bereketli Toprak" (Blessed Soil).'

b. Turkmen President Outlines Priorities for 2008 at Cabinet of Ministers

Original title: *Session of the Cabinet of Ministers of Turkmenistan.*

Source: Official Turkmen Government website/Turkmenistan State News Agency (TDH)/12/16/07. Translated and Excerpted by OSI Turkmenistan Project.

Full version: <http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/en/?idr=1&id=071216b>

Excerpt: President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov chaired a session of the Cabinet of Ministers on December 14 to specify the further strategic steps in the context of the new goals of international co-operation.

[Passage omitted: on opening of UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy and proposed UN resolution to protect energy security.]

[Passage omitted on improvement in Turkmen-Tajik cooperation following President Emomali Rakhmon's visit to Turkmenistan.]

M. Karriev, Chairman of the Central Commission of Elections and Referenda, reported on the results of the elections to local people's councils held on December 9. The elections were held on a competitive basis in compliance with the current national legislation and the norms of international law. The electorate actively participated in the political action. Commenting on the report, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov emphasized that the election marked the next stage of constitutional reform and was an important step towards establishment of a new line of authority, and a school for strengthening the democracy, which was rooted in centuries-old traditions.

A. Nurberdieva, Speaker of the Mejlis, reported on a regular session of Parliament and the adoption of the Law of Turkmenistan On the State Budget of Turkmenistan for the Year 2008. Commenting on the report, the President emphasized that considerable amounts would be assigned to implement the social development program and projects aimed at improving living standards. The program aimed at improving social and living conditions in rural areas, towns in the etraps and etrap centres were of particular importance.

[Passages omitted on preparations for holidays and the opening of two children's recreational centers in Geokdere.]

[Passage omitted on importance of the sacred day Kurban Bayam and keeping transportation uninterrupted during the holiday.]

Kurban Bayram and New Year's are among the most popular holidays for Turkmen, and therefore we must celebrate them properly, "all together, like one big happy family," the president said.

Vice Premier N. Shaguliev reported on the fulfillment of the tasks of urban area development in particular. Emphasizing that creating decent living conditions was a priority of Turkmen state policy, the President instructed N. Shaguliev to draft a special program providing for the construction of schools, kindergartens and comfortable apartment houses meeting the demands of the capital city and each region of the country.

Vice Premier G. Asyrov reported on the progress achieved in the sphere of transport and communications. The President leveled criticism at the Vice Premier for the weak control of implementation of the projects and demanded that the immediate measures should be taken to eliminate the shortcomings and mistakes in the work.

Speaking about the progress in the national oil and gas industry Vice Premier T. Tagiev reported on the work carried on to implement the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline project and to elaborate the large-scale projects. Commenting on the report Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov set the priority tasks to comprehensively employ the profound resource potential of this fundamental sector of national economy to achieve the goals set forth in the national fuel and energy sector development program and to implement Turkmenistan's commitments to its foreign partners.

[Passage omitted on large-scale construction projects including the potash fertilizer works and a cement works and report from Vice Premier H. Muhammedov.]

Minister of Economy and Finance H. Geldimuradov and Chairman of the Board of the Central Bank G. Abilov reported that the salaries would be paid to workers and employees of the enterprises and organizations till December 20 in accordance with the President's instructions.

Summing up the session, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov emphasized that the year 2007 marked a new stage in the history of independent neutral Turkmenistan – an era of fundamental changes and large-scale progressive reforms.

[Passage omitted on instructions to national ministries and departments to develop strategies for the economy in 2008 in each sector.]

c. National Plan Approved to Develop Turkmenistan's Rural Areas

Source: Official Turkmen Government website/12/18/07.

Electronic version: <http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/en/?idr=1&id=071218d>

The President of Turkmenistan has approved a national program through 2020 to improve social and living conditions in villages, settlements and towns in the etraps and the etrap centres.

The high-ranking officials of the national ministries and departments, the khyakims of the velayats, towns and etraps are authorized to ensure the prompt fulfillment of the tasks set forth in the National Program to improve the standards of living in rural areas through effectively employing the existing manufacturing, financial and labor resources.

The President instructed the velayat khyakimlik in collaboration with the relevant ministries and departments to design the yearly action plan, to approve the inventory of the construction projects till February 15 after the Ministry of Economy and Finance of Turkmenistan endorsed the inventory.

d. Turkmenistan Adopts Gender Equality Law

Source: BBC Monitoring—Central Asia/12/19/07 ITAR-TASS/12/19/07. Synopsis prepared by OSI Turkmenistan Project.

Legislation to guarantee the equality of women and men was adopted by the Turkmen parliament and published after it was signed by the country's president December 19, BBC Monitoring Central Asia reported, citing ITAR-TASS. It was the first law of its kind in Turkmenistan, a source with parliament told ITAR-TASS. Turkmenistan joined the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1996, and now domestic law has been brought into alignment with international rights standards, the source said.

Two women hold senior official posts in Turkmenistan: the speaker of parliament and a deputy head of government. Women account for 16 per cent of parliament, which is a higher percentage than in other states in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

e. Turkmen Minister of Communication Receives Reprimand

Source: [turkmenistan.ru/State News Agency\(TDH\)12/15/07](http://turkmenistan.ru/State%20News%20Agency(TDH)12/15/07). Synopsis prepared by OSI Turkmenistan Project

Full version: http://www.turkmenistan.ru/?page_id=3&lang_id=en&elem_id=11850&type=event&sort=date_desc

Synopsis: In a decree signed December 15, President Berdymukhamedov reprimanded Rasulberdy Khojagurbanov, Minister of Communication, turkmenistan.ru reported, citing the State News Agency (TDH). The minister was disciplined for "failing to provide the proper working of loudspeaker equipment and for lax oversight of sound reproduction quality at the international conference "Preventive Diplomacy and International Cooperation".

f. Turkmen Deputy Interior Minister Sacked, Oil Official Reprimanded

Source: BBC Monitoring Central Asia/12/20/07/Turkmen TV Altyr Asyn/12/19/07

Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov has dismissed the first deputy interior minister and reprimanded the chairman of the Turkmennebit (Turkmen oil) state concern for shortcomings in their work, BBC Monitoring--Central Asia reported, citing Turkmen TV Asyr Altyn December 19.

"Myratgeldi Basimgulyyevich Orazov has been dismissed from the post of first deputy interior minister of Turkmenistan for shortcomings in his work," the report said, quoting a presidential decree to this effect.

"The state minister and chairman of the Turkmennebit state concern, Garyagdy Tasliyev, has been reprimanded for failures in the concern's work to implement the program on developing oil and gas industry of Turkmenistan until 2030," the report said.

It added that Jumageldi Babasev, head of the state department in charge of constructing oil and gas facilities and pipelines Turkmennebitgazgurlusyk, was also reprimanded for shortcomings in his work.

The Turkmen president also reprimanded Tachmammet Hurmenov, head of a Turkmen state publishing company, for poor control over publishing newspapers and magazines which resulted in worsening of their qualities, the report said quoting a presidential resolution.

g. New Managers, Old Results: Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights

Source: Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights/12/06/07.

Electronic version: <http://www.chrono-tm.org/?0257043608000000000000011000000>

For about a year, the leader of Turkmenistan has led a painful search for worthy candidates to fill high-ranking positions in the country. Within a calendar year not yet over, three interior ministers and three ministers of education have been replaced. From February to November 2007, three khyakims have been dismissed in the Mary and the Lebap velayats. The reasons for these replacements vary. However, most frequently, the heads are dismissed on the grounds of «serious shortcomings in their work».

Kakageldy Gurbanov is the third khyakim of the Mary velayat this year. In a similar manner, Chatyyarguly Odeberdiyev is the third khyakim this year. Yazgeldi Annayev has become the third khyakim of Turkmenabat during this period.

Any newly-appointed head of the region or the Ministry is unable to investigate all the problems as he is immediately replaced by another one. Yet, where are the results? Has anything been changed in the economic or social sector? Certainly, not. Things remain unchanged: the same mass unemployment, drug addiction, stagnant housing development, neglect of cities and villages.

Taking their posts, the heads of velayats and etraps are primarily engaged in agricultural issues -- cotton and wheat as the President demands. The rest of the problems remain out of sight of the regions' heads.

The managers continue to govern in the same style - from their offices. Giving orders from their office by telephone is the most convenient way of governance for Turkmen officials.

«We, residents of the town of Turkmenabat, have never seen our present mayor. Even during the Soviet era, the head of the town (formerly Chardjou) came to the central market due to interest in market prices. He was always in the loop with city problems. It was contact with town residents that helped the local authorities to solve the town problems», says Chary D.

The present managers seem to be afraid of the people. It is impossible even to get an appointment with them. «Recently, I have tried to make an appointment with the khyakim of the city of Mary regarding the question of employment. However, I was told that he did not deal with such issues», says Svetlana M., a resident of the city.

The managers, not sure that tomorrow they will remain in office, do not try to enter into the problems of the sectors and regions entrusted to them. They even do not have time to form a team of specialists able to assess the situation and to offer ways to solve the problems. It appears that the president himself lacks such a team and this fact accounts for the leap-frogging in the appointments of state officials.

h. Not All Turkmen Muslims Permitted to Make Pilgrimage

Original title: Turkmenistan: Haj Pilgrimage Promises Still Not Honored

Source: Forum 18 News Service/12/14/07.

Electronic version: http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1062

Very senior officials in Turkmenistan have claimed that Muslim pilgrims wishing to undertake the hajj would be free to do so. However, Turkmenistan continues to only permit one government-controlled aircraft of pilgrims -- 188 people -- to travel, Forum 18 News Service reported. The pilgrims include members of the Ministry of National Security (MNB) secret police and other officials. Pilgrims are selected "under complete government control," one source told Forum 18, and need the approval of the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs and of their local khyakimliks (administrations). Saudi Arabia, which sets hajj pilgrimage numbers, would be prepared to allow 5,000 people to make the pilgrimage from Turkmenistan, and Iran has offered the opportunity for pilgrims to travel by bus. President Berdymukhamedov himself earlier this year made the umra ("minor pilgrimage") to Mecca, but has not yet honored promises to allow anyone to make the pilgrimage. Serious violations of freedom of thought, conscience and belief continue against people of all faiths.

i. Widespread Desertion in Turkmenistan's Army: Émigré Site

Original title: *The Turkmen Deserters*

Source: *Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights*

Electronic version: <http://www.chrono-tm.org/?02570436380000000000000011000000>

Newcomers are deserting the Turkmen army. On the way home from military units they sell their military uniforms, and sometimes even their weapons.

Desertion from the Turkmen army has become widespread. That is why commanders do not run the risk of giving weapons and uniforms to recruits even just before they take the military oath. Very often, as soon as young servicemen get new uniforms, desertions occur. These cases are especially frequent in military units in [central] Ahal Region.

[Passage omitted: a new recruit's mother says that during her visit to her son's military unit in Ashgabat to attend an oath-taking ceremony, she saw recruits wearing track suits and sneakers instead of military uniforms].

The first month of the military service becomes an endurance test for draftees. Many of them are not able to tolerate the harsh conditions – abuses and offence by officers and senior conscripts, malnutrition, repeated tribal fights. As a result, many flee. According to former servicemen, the most challenging and difficult experience for draftees during the first days of military service are the harsh discipline standards enforced by the officers, strenuous exercise, hazing, humiliating treatment of juniors and the constant hunger.

There are many cases of soldiers' deaths, including suicides. This is thoroughly hidden by the military prosecutor's office and officers themselves. The parents of the deceased soldiers get their bodies in sealed zinc coffins, which representatives of military bodies do not allow them to open. It is often written down in medical documents that a soldier has died of a heart attack.

[Passage omitted: former servicemen say conditions in the army barracks are "like prison cells",].

3. ECONOMIC NEWS

a. Turkmenistan's GNP Increases 111.6% Compared to 2006

Original title: *Figures for Turkmenistan's Economic Growth Published at Cabinet Meeting*

Source: *BBC Monitoring—Central Asia/12/19/07 ITAR-TASS/12/19/07. Synopsis prepared by OSI Turkmenistan Project*

Full version: http://www.turkmenistan.ru/?page_id=3&lang_id=ru&elem_id=11861&type=event&sort=date_desc

Synopsis: At a meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers on December 18, President Berdymukhamedov announced the figures for Turkmenistan's economic growth in 2007, turkmenistan.ru reported, citing the Turkmen State News Agency (TDH). The Gross National Product exceeds 180 trillion manats [\$US 34.6 billion], an increase in growth rate by 21 percent compared to 2006.

Industrial growth was 126.6 percent; agriculture 119 percent; construction 120.9 percent; transportation and communication 120.5. Thus, the overall GNP increased 111.6 percent. The volume of investment was 23.1 trillion manat (\$4.42 billion), 13.6 percent higher than in 2006. Inflation is said to be no greater than 6 percent, 1 percent less than in 2006.

Export of gas increased by 10 percent, and accordingly, production of gas and oil grew 9 percent, production of electricity 6 percent, petroleum products, 2 percent; iodine, 7 percent; raw materials, 35 percent; cement and minerals 2 percent; fish and fish products, 17 percent. Production of paper decreased 54 percent; and fertilizer by 9 percent. Production of meat and milk, as well as head of large and small animals remained the same.

b. Malaysia's Petronas to Build Oil Platforms in Turkmenistan

Source: Agence-France Press (AFP)/12/15/07

Full version: <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5g-CKQHlisQM81UTDs2YXUm2c5Nxw>

Synopsis: Petronas, Malaysia's national oil company has been cleared to begin building oil platforms and share in pipeline construction in Turkmenistan, AFP reported, citing Turkmen state TV.

"President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov has approved plans by Petronas to build oil platforms in cooperation with Turkmenistan so as to begin work on offshore finds as well as its wish to build pipelines in the country," a television report said.

A Petronas official said he hoped not only to build oil platforms for its own use but for other companies as well. "This will allow the establishment of another oil platform manufacturing centre for the Caspian Sea," he added. Petronas has been acting as a contractor for Turkmenistan's state oil company Turkmenneft since 1996,

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